

Gillian Keegan MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills  
House of Commons  
London  
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Dear Minister

### **Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth**

Thank you for providing us with the Further Education Skills for Jobs White Paper. We warmly welcome the White Paper's ambition to give people the skills they need and to create 'a blueprint for the future.'

We wish to feed in our views on behalf of the social housing sector in the North of England. By way of introduction, the Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) is a membership body for over 90% of housing providers and local authorities in the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humber.

The programme set out in the White Paper offers a real opportunity to match skills development to the needs of local economies and to address the long-term regional inequalities that the Government has promised to 'level up'.

We agree fully that technical education will play a critical role in providing the skills needed to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and a key focus for our sector in the levelling up programme must be the retrofit of housing to meet the net zero ambitions as set out in the Prime Minister's Ten Point Plan. Our existing homes account for around ¼ of emissions in the North of England.

A green recovery involving housing retrofit will require the right skills and training to deliver change. However, our member organisations tell us that there is a skills gap in the housing retrofit sector which needs to be filled quickly if the Government's housing delivery of targets for net zero are to be met.

Social housing providers are key players, with demonstrable historic capacity to deliver home improvement projects at a scale which could drive supply chain development. While the sector is leading the way, further support for the sector is urgently needed to set a clear pathway to decarbonise household heating. With levels of unemployment rising across the North, the decarbonisation of housing could provide a source of new jobs, skills and training for people who have lost their job during the pandemic.

We would wish to see greater clarity through the White Paper on the potential for skills development connected to a programme of housing decarbonisation as part of the Government's Green Industrial Revolution.

Our evidence for the scale of the challenge ahead is set out in a report published in late 2020 by IPPR North called Northern Powerhomes: A green recovery plan to decarbonise homes in the North.<sup>i</sup>

The report identified that there are still far too few firms with the expertise and knowledge of the housing retrofit market to meet existing demand. The scale of the work still to be done will require help for employers to diversify as well as support young people currently training to be plumbers, plasterers and heating engineers to consider specialising in housing decarbonisation.

The research highlighted scope for 77,000 retrofit jobs by 2035 in the Northern regions and identified that 111,000 indirect jobs across the UK could be created over the same period.

Many social housing providers already do much to drive skills and demand in their own organisations, including skills support for their technical teams and through their supply chain and working locally with Further Education institutions. But more support could be available, to drive partnership working with local colleges, local enterprise partnerships, institutes of technology and the BEIS energy hubs. These local energy hubs can work locally with housing providers to pilot incentive schemes for Northern-based firms which subsidise training and accreditation opportunities in low-carbon heating systems.

Social housing providers for their part can develop partnerships with their local colleges and LEPs' employment and skills boards to get their help in making retrofit skills a priority for economic recovery.

Combined authorities with devolved responsibility for adult skills budgets should also be encouraged to prioritise retrofit skills to boost take-up. If devolution of skills and employment support to combined authorities is extended in the near future this could also play a pivotal role in helping the North to become a leading centre for excellence in housing decarbonisation.

Furthermore, we believe there is more scope within colleges to raise awareness of retrofit careers amongst prospective and existing students.

The announcement of new Local Skills Improvement Plans in the White Paper is welcome, but further improvements will need to be made to ensure that the current and future workforce have the skills that are required. For example, our research has identified further scope for cross-departmental working to examine how enrolment timetables within further education can be made more flexible to increase supply of places for trades skills, with the option to pilot a different approach in the North.

In addition to optimising the routes into creating the supply of skills required, the forthcoming Heat and Buildings Strategy from BEIS is urgently needed, outlining decarbonisation pathways for the housing sector and to increase employer demand for these skills.

We welcome the setting up of the joint-departmental Green Jobs Taskforce to set the direction for the jobs market in transitioning to a high-skill, low carbon economy but feel that if the forthcoming Green Jobs and Skills Action Plan is not aligned with the soon to be published Heat and Buildings Strategy, then the provision of a properly funded and coherent system of technical education that meets the needs of both adults and young people to have the necessary skills for this important sector may be missed.

We would be grateful if our comments could feed into the ongoing discussions in the delivery of the White Paper and the work of the Green Jobs Taskforce.

I would be happy to meet with you to talk about how our housing improvement programme could better align with the ambitions of the Skills White Paper.

Kind regards



Tracy Harrison  
Chief Executive  
Northern Housing Consortium

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<sup>1</sup> [IPPR North Northern Powerhomes: A Green recovery plan to decarbonise homes in the North](#)